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Commander of All Lincoln's Armies:A Life of General Henry W. Halleck

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Review

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Old Brains

Admirable administrator, weak warrior

Award-winning historian and the W.L. Giles Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History at Mississippi State University, John F. Marszalek, has produced the first truly in-depth and balanced biography of Henry Wager Halleck, one of the Civil War's most controversial and unappreciated army commanders. Oftentimes marginalized, disparaged, or ignored by historians, Halleck deserves to be remembered as more than a glorified clerk. For two years he was general-in-chief of federal armies and the man to whom the Northern public looked for military victory over the Confederacy. An optimistic President Lincoln had summoned Halleck to Washington in July 1862 in the hope that he could duplicate in the East the dazzling victories that had been won under his nominal command in the West. Placed in the top army job with expectations of strong and decisive leadership, Halleck would instead disappoint both the superiors and subordinates who once admired him. Yet in the summer of 1862, Lincoln's promotion of Halleck to command of all Union armies seemed to be both wise and correct. What officer would be better qualified to direct and coordinate a thousand-mile battlefield than the nation's leading military theorist known sardonically among his compatriots as Old Brains?

Halleck, much like his jealous rival George B. McClellan, was both a gifted tactician and an able organizer, but neither man had the aggressive temperament or the gambler's instinct to risk all on the battlefield. Moreover, Halleck found active field operations ruinous to his health and thus he fought much of the war from behind a desk or over the telegraph wires. While Little Mac and other generals were beloved by their men, Halleck could inspire no such devotion

amongst the rank and file or, for that matter, among Washington's leading politicians. As a military professional, Halleck instinctively disliked Washington's vulgar politicians' who meddled in military affairs or who attacked his subordinates or himself for partisan gain. Yet, many of the barbs of criticism leveled at Halleck were not without foundation. The hard-driving martial lion Lincoln had hoped for proved to be instead a rather pedantic, fussy, and unimaginative administrative pussycat. As supreme commander, Halleck seemed chronically afraid of making mistakes and expended more energy in ducking the responsibilities of his office than in formulating a winning military strategy. He would send subordinates advice, encouragement, and criticism, but not orders. When such flabby-handed direction helped cause a number of Union military debacles, Halleck absolved himself of responsibility. As the crescendo of public criticism against his handling of the war grew, Halleck became even less willing to make command decisions, and instead buried himself in a sea of army paperwork and bureaucratic routine.

Halleck's utter failure as the commander who could effectively coordinate Union strategy led to his replacement in 1864 by Ulysses S. Grant, the subordinate who had often been a past target of criticism and whose victories had facilitated Halleck's own rise. While replaced as generalissimo, Halleck nonetheless settled into the useful role as army chief-of-staff. Indeed, once relieved of the responsibility for making hard decisions, Halleck's talents as an administrator made a valuable contribution to Union victory. Always happier tackling paperwork rather than problems, Halleck was well suited to be the one who transmitted Grant's orders to all fronts and to act as a conduit between top civilian and military officials to keep the military machine running smoothly. Halleck also proved that he was able to adapt to the war's changing nature by supporting--so long as he was not the person ultimately responsible--the destructive kind of war that Grant, Sherman, and Sheridan were meting out to the South.

Marszalek rightfully concentrates much of his book on Halleck's Civil War career, but like any good biographer, he begins the story with Halleck's early life and a discussion of the factors that helped shape his personality. By tracing the development of the future commanding general from his unhappy childhood with a father he disliked through his years as a stellar West Point cadet, army officer, and enterprising businessman and lawyer in the booming California of the 1850s, Marszalek is able to flesh out a three dimensional portrait of a complex personality. The author gives great consideration to emotional and

mental health issues to explain why Halleck developed and sometimes acted as he did. Oftentimes in precarious health, Halleck was known to treat his illnesses with opium and alcohol, which Marszalek believes might explain in part why Halleck was unable to exercise strong control or make decisive decisions at crucial points in the war. Drawing on a wide variety of source materials, Marszalek succeeds in painting a vivid portrait of a multi-faceted officer who could be petulant, peevish, and unforgiving, but who was not without a sense of humor, a warm regard for his intimate family and close friends, and deep love for his country. Marszalek is remarkably evenhanded and fair in weighing evidence and making judgments concerning Halleck's motivations and performance. While the book's text is both concise and readable, one improvement that could be made is better identification of the photographic illustration sources rather than placing them at the back of the book. This volume fills a biographical void and is well worth reading as it provides useful insights into the workings and failures of the Union's wartime command structure. An added plus is that the author provides closure to the story by detailing the fate of Halleck's wife and son after his death, as well as accounting for the massive fortune that Halleck accumulated through diversified business holdings. Although only 57 when he died, Halleck always seemed older than his actual years and no spasms of national grief occurred at his passing as he had long been overshadowed by his one-time subordinates. Undoubtedly a man of enormous talent and success in nearly all his endeavors, Halleck did not--indeed, could not--measure up to his greatest task as commander of all Lincoln's armies.

Dr. David J. Gerleman is a lecturer in American history at George Mason University, and is active in numerous history organizations in Washington, DC. He is currently completing a book manuscript entitled Mount and Master: The Civil War Cavalry Trooper and His Horse--A Study of Care, Treatment, and Use, 1861-1866.